

In the Blistering Heat:
Green Technology Will Not Save the Desert



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The land is alive.

This notion sounds simple and perhaps even obvious, but in practice the land is often treated as if it is a dead mass waiting for human development. This is especially true in the desert where we see a long stretch of abstraction born into reality - the U.S.-Mexico border wall. But the land is inundated with organisms living and breathing together in time with the rhythm of the soil. It is alive and not because we will it to be and not because it aligns with human ideas of progress - the land is a body with its own agency, its own choices, and its own way of being that is both intrinsically tied to and independent from people.

In many conversations surrounding the border wall, and more specifically the ecological impact of it, the agency of the land is often ignored. Even greater still, the long-term implications upon the land, animals, and the larger ecosystem surrounding the border becomes an

issue revolving around the continuation and reproduction of colonial violence powered by techno-industrial horror. In a recent issue of *Tucson Weekly*, an excerpt from *The Beloved Border: Humanity and Hope in a Contested Land* by Mirriam Davidson was included along with the question: “Does it make sense to turn the border wall into a sea of solar panels?” The excerpt is a conversation between Davidson and Gary Nabhan, founder of Native Seeds/SEARCH in Tucson, Arizona. Although the proposition is overlaid with a thin layer of concern for border communities, there is a larger animal that breaks its head through again and again: the humanistic desire to reify domination over the land, animals, and even people who can easily be cut out of the category of “human” at will.

Identity necessitates borders – what it is and what it is not to “be” a certain identity – and to define “humanity” as an identity requires us to define what is and what is not human. Therefore, in defining the boundaries between human and non-human beings, this boundary ruptures the connection not just between people and land or people and animals, but people from the ecosystem. People from earth. Even within the confines of the human identity, we have observed how, throughout history, entire groups of people were and are cast out of the bounds of what is “human” - the humanist project itself becoming a driving force in the colonization and genocide of these beings who are not included within a human identity. Thus, I’m inclined to think that the title “Humanity and Hope in a Contested Land” has nothing to do with Indigenous people, nor does it even have much to do with serious consideration for what is necessary for the land to thrive, but rather, it is a testament to the continued pillaging of the land that upholds humanism, ideas of progress, and colonization while positing itself as the eco-friendly vision for the “future.”

The excerpt calls for removing the existing border wall and replacing it with a “sea of solar panels,” dubbing the proposition as a “solar wall.” Generally, the idea is to stimulate the border economy in such a way that will allow people to meet their basic needs while also providing “green jobs” and “green energy” to these communities. Logistically, this proposition is largely untenable and the reasoning behind it breaks down quickly upon inspection. Although the physical manifestation of this proposal is highly unlikely, it is worth noting because it highlights the liberal poverty of imagination: this proposition assumes that because the border presently exists, it must always exist, and further it illustrates the liberal understanding of borders – for them, the border is only a wall; it is a line in the sand separating two realities. This is reflected by one of the originators of the “solar wall” idea when they say, “We have to try to find a solution, because the wall exists already.” However, the border is a logistical operation. The border becomes metaphysical in its enforcement, meaning that it validates the existence and authority of the state while seeking control beyond its physical structure. It seeks to control all possible moments of time and space, its shadow following individuals far beyond the borderlands in an attempt at establishing its own omnipresence. There are ICE facilities in places far from the border, i.e., Chicago or Ohio, for this reason.

Whether or not there is a physical barrier in place, the border necessitates violence and the reproduction of the settler-colonial state. Even if the wall is replaced by solar panels, the logistical enforcement of the border would only shift to accommodate the physical change, but ultimately would not be destroyed or made “better.” It is likely that it would wreak havoc on border communities and Indigenous people specifically because it is harder for the



general population to oppose “progressive” sounding policies – counterinsurgency would bend along the border towards the trajectory we are already witnessing in the form of “progressive policing,” and no doubt would the current presidential administration use this to their advantage. In short, it would place more strain on those who oppose the border’s existence. Nabhan specifically notes, “A fifth of the land along the border belongs to Indigenous communities who also do not want a wall,” but then later states “We will not get the border right if we think this is just a nation-to-nation negotiation.” These statements lay bare some of the true motivations behind this proposal – even though it is coated in progressive language and pays lip service to Indigenous people and land, maintaining the border in such a way that erases settler guilt prevails in importance over everything else.



The proposition is not about improving anyone's lives, but more so improving conditions to better support an economy that strangles the people on the outer edges, the people who Nabhan says "bring our daily bread." This sentiment is succinctly summed up later in the piece when he states that "The entire border has been neglected for a long time," an obtuse parting from the reality and function of the border.

Further, solar panels, and green technology at large, are far from being "eco-friendly." Solar panels, in short, require precious metal extraction, industrial production using non-sustainable materials, severe labor conditions, transportation that requires massive amounts of fossil fuels, and then once they cannot be used anymore, they are

not recyclable. Like many of the things techno-industrial society produces and propagates as “solutions” to the problems it itself creates, they are ultimately laid to rest in landfills where they continue to leech toxic chemicals into the earth. When it is explained that this “solar wall” would provide “solutions” to the ecocide currently happening along the border, what they really mean is that we would be able to much more adequately sustain the lifeway of techno-industrial civilization. Even if this plan were put into place, the utopian idea that solar panels would stop or even reverse the damage that has already been done would easily falter as the continued destruction and slicing apart of the land would be reflected in the observably suffering ecosystem. This “solar wall” is not only short-sighted, but just as destructive as the current border wall.

This then begs the question: what about the land itself? The “ecological benefits” to this plan outlined by Nabhan sound glamorous and, to many people, like an eco-friendly solution to environmental crisis at the border. “Heat sensitive food crops could be grown under the solar photovoltaic arrays, as they are now being done at three Tucson schools and at a demo project at Biosphere 2. Rainwater could be collected off the solar collectors to irrigate crops for use at nearby schools, clinics and homeless shelters in rural border communities.” However, this vision alludes to a very glaring and important factor that is never outright named in the piece: the power dynamics and structures that would make this possible (i.e., Nabhan’s ties to the University of Arizona), once again reifying the state and institutional power that continues to harm border communities and land without calling these structures into question. Additionally, this vision still implies an exploitative relationship to the land rather than a symbiotic one. Within this framework, the land loses its autonomy as it cannot



ebb and flow as it's meant to; it cannot breathe in its natural rhythm but instead is forced to operate on the terms of people who are not interested in building a relationship which does not inherently deplete the land for their own benefit. Clearly, the goal is to reproduce a lifeway that destroys everything in its wake, beginning with the land and finishing with humans. Using solar power and irrigating crops will not reverse the trauma deeply sunk into the soil. In some ways, it may even make it worse by replacing the natural terrain with agriculture that depletes the soil and makes it more difficult for wildlife to thrive. Nabhan's vision is not to liberate the land; it's to extract as much as possible in the name of humanitarianism. The land's agency is stripped away, and the consequence is an ecosystem on its last legs before extinction.

What will it take to escape the humanist nightmare of civilization? The goal here is to leave with more questions than answers, to dig deep into the parts of ourselves we deny through reproducing this reality. While liberals like Nabhan dream of a so-called future that's rife with the same dead soil that propagates colonial terror, where are the avenues, the liminal spaces, where the rest of us can enact a wildness that sets flame to their dreams? 🌿

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